

## Right of Refugees, Right to Demonstrate Peacefully, Right to Dignity A Statement of US Churches and Christian Agencies on Gaza

April 12, 2018

Friday, March 30, thousands of Palestinians participated in the first of several weeks of planned nonviolent demonstrations in Gaza near the fence with Israel. These demonstrations are expected to continue until May 15, when Palestinians mark Nakba (“catastrophe”) Day, remembering the 1948 displacement and dispossession of 750,000 Palestinians, and resulting in a Palestinian diaspora and a refugee population that today numbers over five million, including descendants. At the same time Israel will celebrate 70 years since its establishment on May 14, 1948.

More than 1.3 million of Gaza’s nearly 2 million people are refugees. The Gaza demonstrations are an assertion of Palestinian rights: the rights of refugees, the right to demonstrate peacefully against injustice, and the right to live in and with dignity, not under closed military confinement or blockade.

In the first week of demonstrations, at least 16 people were killed and, according to the International Committee for the Red Cross, approximately 1500 people required medical assistance, with approximately 800 injuries resulting from the use of live ammunition. Reports indicate that the firing came from the Israeli military in an indiscriminate manner. A group of [United Nations human rights experts](#)<sup>[1]</sup> stated, “There is no available evidence to suggest that the lives of heavily armed security forces were threatened.” The United States stood by and allowed Israel to carry out these attacks without any public criticism or challenge. Such US complicity is a continuation of the historical policy of active support for Israel’s occupation and US disregard for Palestinian rights. This complicity builds resentment and damages US national security. Palestinian refugees have the right to return to their homes, and to compensation for loss of property, as laid out in UN General Assembly resolution 194.

As US churches and Christian agencies, we support the Palestinian people as they courageously stand up for their rights. We have worked in our own context in the cause of justice, peace, and equality, and continue to do so even as we recognize we have too often fallen short in these efforts. We reject the use of violence by individuals, groups or states. In the wake of demonstrations that have resulted in tragedy and death, and anticipating the continuation of Palestinian protests over the coming weeks, we cannot be silent.

- We oppose in no uncertain terms the use of violence against the protesters, especially the lethal use of weapons and force by the Israeli military, and call for it to end that practice. We support the call by B’Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization, to Israeli soldiers to refuse orders to shoot when it said, “Soldiers must not be ordered to use lethal force other than in life-threatening situations. As a rule, demonstrations inside the Gaza Strip, approaching the fence or even sabotaging it, do not constitute such situations. ... [W]hen the government betrays its soldiers’ trust and arms them with unlawful orders, we are here to remind not only of the rules of morality but also of legal requirements: **A patently unlawful order must not be obeyed.**”
- We call for an investigation into the deaths and injuries suffered resulting from the use of force.
- We concur with the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court who recently has said “Violence against civilians – in a situation such as the one prevailing in Gaza – could constitute crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (“ICC” or “the Court”), as could the use of civilian presence for the purpose of shielding military activities.... My Office will continue to closely watch the

situation and will record any instance of incitement or resort to unlawful force. I urge all those concerned to refrain from further escalating this tragic situation.”

- We call upon the United States, and particularly President Trump and members of Congress, to censure the violent and indiscriminate actions of the State of Israel in response to the demonstrations which in no way threaten the security of the state or its citizens, and to hold Israel appropriately accountable, ensuring that US aid isn't used in ways that contravene established US and international laws, given the more than \$3 billion in military aid the US disburses to Israel annually.
- We call on the US to support the rights of refugees, including Palestinian refugees, based on international law and conventions, through the fora in which the US participates.
- In keeping with the imperative to support refugees' rights, we call upon the United States to resume its full funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) which supports schools, hospitals, and other essential services for Palestinian refugees. The US recently announced that it would provide \$60 million to UNRWA with no assurance of further funding for 2018. If the US provides no additional funds in 2018, this would mean an 83% funding cut over the 2017 contribution of \$365 million.
- We call upon the international community, including the US government, to insist on an end to the blockade of Gaza, which has resulted in uninhabitable conditions for the people there, including poverty and lack of sufficient access to clean water, food, medicine and medical supplies, electricity, fuel, and construction equipment. The United Nations [concluded as early as 2012](#)<sup>[2]</sup> that Gaza was on track to be unlivable by 2020, and [noted in 2017](#)<sup>[3]</sup> that the trends of deterioration had accelerated.

In demonstrating, Palestinians have sought to bring the world's attention to, and to recover, their rights—rights as refugees, to demonstrate, and to live in dignity. They have been met with an immediate and tragic rejection of those rights, but as people of hope, and in the season of Easter, we believe that those rights will ultimately prevail. In this time, we pray fervently, speak clearly, and act diligently in support of peace, justice, and equality.

#### **Alliance of Baptists**

**American Friends Service Committee**

**Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

**The Episcopal Church**

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

**Friends Committee on National Legislation**

**Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ**

**Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns**

**Mennonite Central Committee U.S.**

**National Council of Churches**

**Pax Christi International**

**Pax Christi USA**

**Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

**Reformed Church in America**

**The United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society**

**United Church of Christ**

[1] <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22924&LangID=E>

[2] <https://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/file/publications/gaza/Gaza%20in%202020.pdf>

[3] [https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/gaza\\_10\\_years\\_later\\_-\\_11\\_july\\_2017.pdf](https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/gaza_10_years_later_-_11_july_2017.pdf)